A high-angle photograph of a wooden canoe floating on clear, shallow water. The water is so clear that the sandy bottom and green aquatic plants are visible. Inside the canoe, there are several wooden planks, a yellow life preserver, and some yellow rope. The background shows a shoreline with green foliage. A semi-transparent white box with a dark blue border is overlaid on the top half of the image, containing the title text.

Stories of Words: Native American Languages

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Learning About Words

“Look at that moose! It’s dripping wet, and it has a mouthful of weeds!” This person is speaking English, but *moose* is not an English word. Instead, it’s from a Native American language that may have meant “he strips off.” That’s because moose eat bark they strip off trees.

The settlers from England who landed in North America in the 1500s found places, animals, and plants they'd never seen before. Sometimes, they named these things for animals, plants, or even places that looked like those in their home countries. Sometimes, they named them with words they borrowed from another language. These are two ways words enter a language.

The Native American groups in North America spoke languages that are very different from English. In addition, there may have been as many as a thousand different Native American languages. Often, Native Americans and settlers invented sign language that allowed them to communicate with each other. In that way, both languages grew and the people began to understand one another.



1

ANIMALS

The settlers from England first explored the eastern part of North America. At that time, this area was covered with woods, and the woods were filled with animals. Some of these animals were quite different from European animals. Sometimes, the English called these animals by the names used in the Algonquin languages, which were spoken widely in the eastern part of North America.



Some North American animals, such as bears and eagles, also lived in Europe. The animals were slightly different in North America, but the settlers used the names they knew. They sometimes changed the European names to describe what was different about the North American animals. One type of eagle became known as the bald eagle. That was because the white feathers on its head made it look like it was bald. Another was called the golden eagle because it had yellow feathers. Both kinds were different from the white-tailed eagles known in Europe.



The settlers also gave some animals names that did not quite fit them. For example, when they saw a bird running on the ground, they thought it looked like a bird from the country of Turkey, which is in Asia. They gave the American bird the same name: the Turkey hen or fowl. Even though the American turkey is not the same bird as the one from Turkey, the name stuck.



Bison



When the English saw huge animals on the plains of North America, they called them buffaloes because they looked like the water buffaloes of Asia and northern Africa. Both are large grass-eating animals, but their heads and horns are shaped differently. The correct name for this North American animal is bison. *Bison* is actually a French word that means “wild ox.” Many people, though, still refer to these animals as buffalo.

Buffalo



Many English words for animals have Algonquin roots. Here are some examples.

English Word	Algonquin Word	Meaning of Algonquin Word
moose	moos	he strips off (bark from trees)
opossum	opassum	white dog

Chipmunk



Ajidamoo: He who descends trees upside down

Caribou



Qalipu: Snow shoveler

Skunk



Segonku: He who sprays

Terrapin



Torope: Little turtle

Raccoon



Arahkunem: He scratches with the hands

2

PLANTS

Sailing across the Atlantic Ocean often took two months or more, so the food the settlers carried was usually gone when they arrived in North America. They may have brought seeds to plant crops, but they needed food as soon as they landed. They couldn't wait for several months for their crops to grow.



That meant the settlers had to learn which foods to eat from the Native Americans. The native people grew, hunted, or gathered food from the land. They knew what kinds of foods would grow in the soil and temperatures of North America.

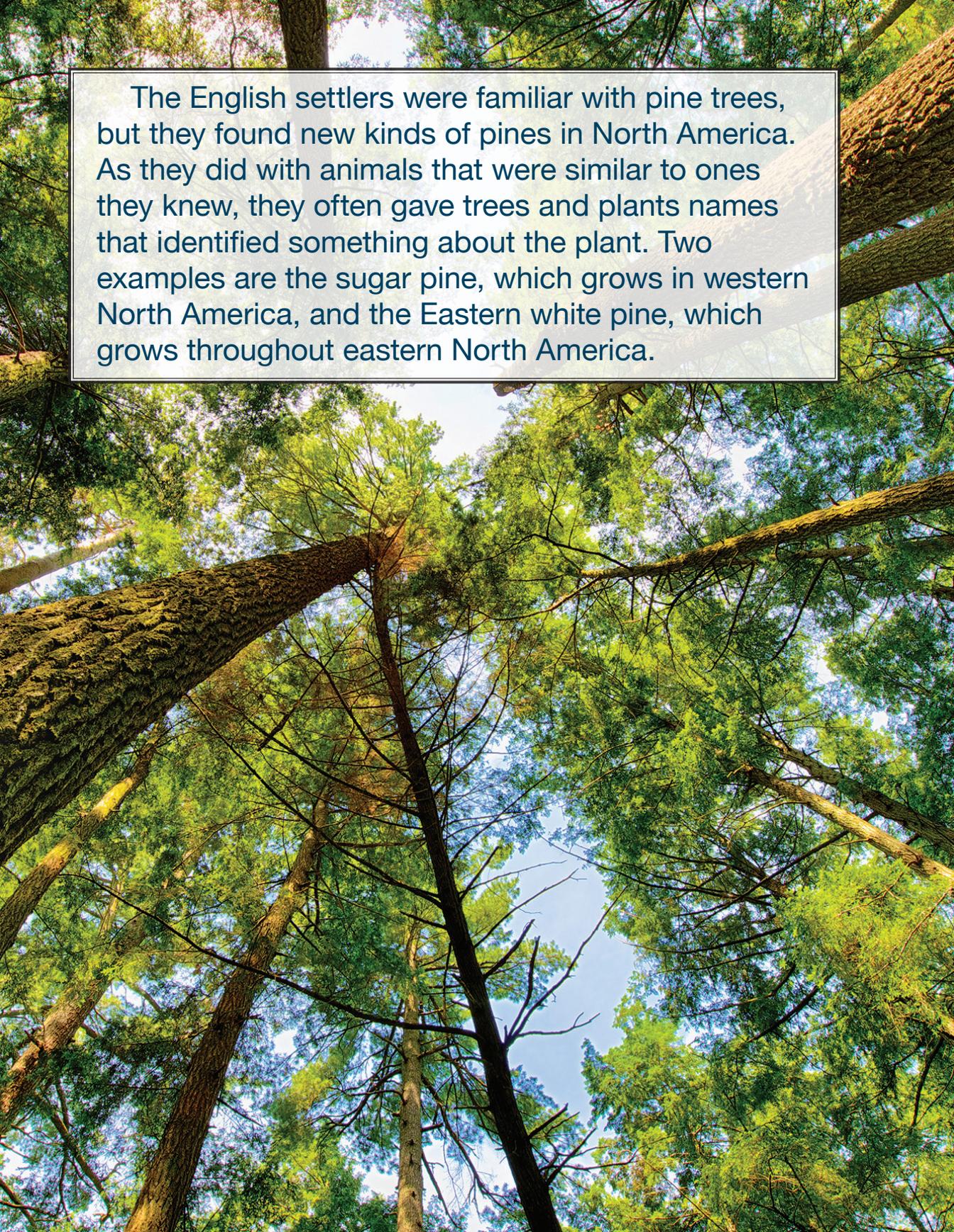
The native people of the Northeast planted many different crops, but they ate lots of three kinds of foods: corn, beans, and squash. These foods became known as the three sisters. They were not grown in England, so they were new to the settlers.





Native Americans also grew foods on trees and bushes that were new to the settlers. One type of tree nut is the pecan. The outer shell of the pecan is hard, but when it is cracked open, there is a tasty nut inside. The Cree, another Native American group, called this nut the *pakan*, meaning “a nut that requires a stone to crack.”

The pecan tree is a type of hickory tree, and the name *hickory* also comes from a Native American word. The Algonquins made a milky drink from hickory nuts. The name of this drink was *pocohiquara*. This name became the word *hickory* in English.



The English settlers were familiar with pine trees, but they found new kinds of pines in North America. As they did with animals that were similar to ones they knew, they often gave trees and plants names that identified something about the plant. Two examples are the sugar pine, which grows in western North America, and the Eastern white pine, which grows throughout eastern North America.

Many English words for plants have Algonquin roots. Here are some examples.

English Word	Native American Word	Meaning of Algonquin Word
squash	ascutasquash	green things that may be eaten raw
pecan	pakan	hard-shelled nut
hominy	appuminneonash	dried corn that is ground or beaten



3

TRAVEL & WEATHER

As you have read, much of eastern North America was covered with woods. However, there were many rivers and lakes, too. These bodies of water made travel difficult. Also, the snow in the northern areas made travel even harder.

Over the years, the native peoples invented vehicles that allowed them to travel more easily in these conditions. Many also moved to different locations for different parts of the year. This meant that they had to have ways to move their possessions, too.

One Native American group moved people and things over the snow in a kind of sled. They called this sled a *tobakun*, which means “a long, flat-bottomed sled.” The settlers started using this sled because it was strong and could be used for many things. They called it a *toboggan*. You may have used a toboggan to slide down a hill in the snow.



To travel on rivers, many Native American groups built canoes. The canoes were different in different areas because the people built them with trees that grew nearby. Often, canoes were made with the bark of birch trees. The strips of bark were sewn together with tree roots and sealed with resin, a thick liquid that was gathered from pines and other trees. The hardened resin kept canoes dry inside.



In the area that is now Canada, the Native peoples made qayaqs, canoes that were made with animal skin. You may notice that the word *qayaq* sounds like *kayak*, which was the way the English settlers spelled the word.





The settlers needed clothes for their new climates, too. The Algonquin peoples made a kind of soft shoe called a makasin from animal skins. The word *moccasin*, in fact, means “shoe” in an Algonquin language.

Because it was so cold in the north, the settlers also learned to make warm clothes like those worn by Native Americans. One coat was the *parka*, which is an Aleutian word that means “an animal skin or jacket made from animal skin.” Parkas are heavy jackets with hoods, which were perfect for protecting people from the arctic’s freezing temperatures.



4

GATHERINGS & OBJECTS

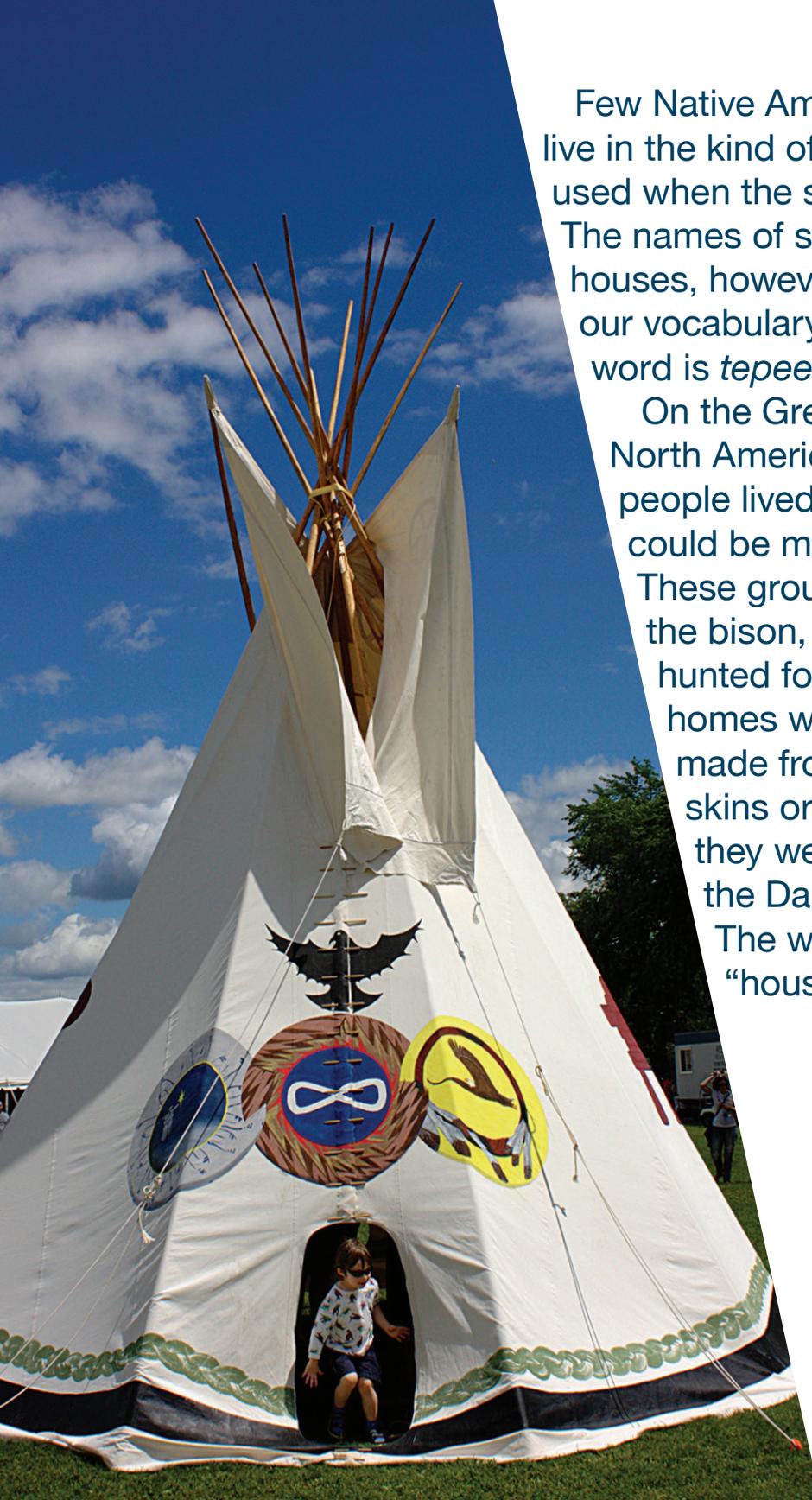
Today, the word *powwow* is often used to describe a meeting of powerful people, especially when a discussion is expected. It is originally from the Algonquin word *powwaw*, meaning “a spiritual leader or counselor.” Later, the word came to mean “a council or conference.” Powwows today are ceremonies or gatherings in which Native Americans and non-Native Americans eat, dance, and honor native cultures.



In the central Caribbean, the native people used a framework of sticks called a *barbakoa* to grill meat and fish. This word and cooking style spread from the Caribbean to Spanish and French settlers in North America. Eventually, this became the English word *barbeque*.



Another word in English that was originally from the Caribbean islands is *buccaneer*. The *buccan* was the native word for a rack for roasting meat. The French borrowed this word, and they called hunters who used such racks *boucaniers*. English settlers changed the word to *buccaneer*. They also changed the word's meaning slightly to describe the pirates who sailed the Caribbean in search of treasure.



Few Native Americans today live in the kind of homes they used when the settlers arrived. The names of some of the houses, however, remain in our vocabulary. One such word is *tepee*.

On the Great Plains of North America, the Native people lived in homes that could be moved quickly. These groups followed the bison, which they hunted for food. Their homes were usually made from animal skins or tree bark, and they were known by the Dakota word *tipi*. The word *tipi* means “house.”

In the woods of the Northeast, the Native Americans lived in homes called wigwams. *Wigwam* is another Algonquin word, and it means “their house.” Wigwams were made with wooden frames that were covered with woven mats and strips of birch bark. The frames were often shaped like domes or cones, but they could also be shaped like rectangles with arched roofs.



Here are a few other examples of Native American words for objects that have come into English.

English Word	Native American Word	Meaning of Algonquin Word
papoose	papoos	baby
powwow	powwaw	a spiritual leader; later, a meeting
wampum	wampumpeag	string of white beads

5

PLACES

The English settlers made a big mistake when they landed in North America. They thought they had landed in India because they didn't know there was a continent between Europe and Asia. They soon found out, though, that they hadn't arrived in India at all. However, the English called the people who lived in this land "Indians" anyway.

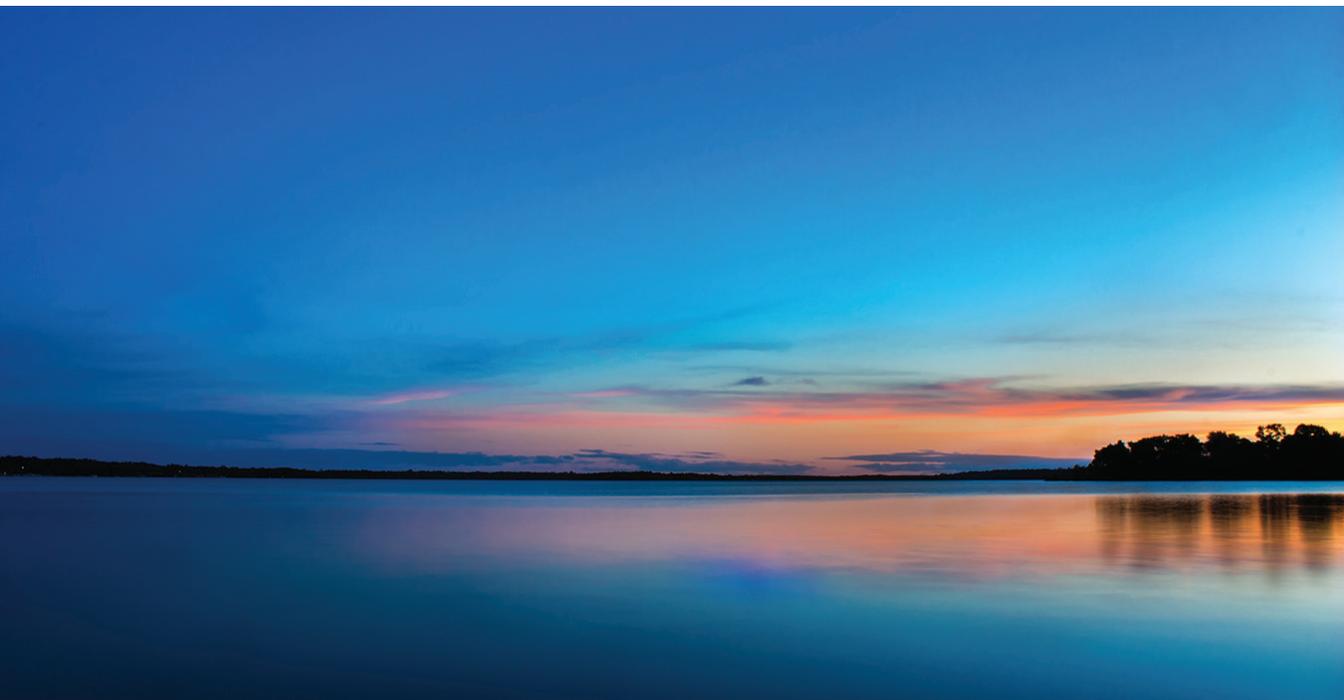
Many of the names for places in North America today are Native American words. Often, the name of a territory or region came to be called by the name of the people who lived there. Even when the territory became a state, the name remained. In fact, the names of almost half of the states in the United States have their origins in Native American languages.



Here are a few state names that have roots in a Native American language.

State	Native American Language	Meaning
Alaska	Aleut	great land; that which the sea breaks against
Connecticut	Mohican	beside the long tidal river
Dakota (North and South)	Sioux	friend
Massachusetts	Massachusett	at or about the great hill
Minnesota	Dakota	sky-tinted water
Nebraska	Oto	flat water
Ohio	Iroquis	great river
Tennessee	Cherokee	river
Texas	Caddo	friends or allies
Utah	Ute	people of the mountains

Minnesota



The names of many rivers, lakes, towns, and cities also can be traced to Native American languages. The Great Lakes of North America are the largest group of freshwater lakes in the world. The name of one lake, Michigan, was the word for “great water” used by the Chippewa people. A city on the shore of Lake Michigan also has a name from a Native American language: Chicago. The name *Chicago* has two possible origins. If the origin is from the language of the Fox people, it means “place of the wild onion.” If it is from the language of the Ojibwa people, it means “at the skunk place.”



The Mississippi and Missouri Rivers are the longest rivers in North America, and their names also come from Native American languages. The name *Mississippi* comes from a Chippewa word that means “great river.” The name *Missouri* may mean “wooden canoe people” or “river of big canoes.”



Our Changing Language

The English settlers brought their language and ideas with them when they moved to North America, of course. But sometimes new experiences and new surroundings require new words.

The settlers borrowed many words from the Native Americans they met in their new country. Some words sounded and meant the same things in English and in their original language, but some changed. The settlers also used English words, but changed some to suit their new location. Languages change all the time in this way, adding and dropping words to better describe new things and new ideas.



Glossary

Aleutian people a Native American group from the arctic, in present-day Alaska

Algonquin languages a group of at least 24 languages spoken by the people who lived in the woodlands of eastern North America

Algonquin people a group of Native Americans from the eastern area of present-day Canada

Caribbean a sea that lies south of the United States and the islands in that sea

Chippewa a Native American group from the northern area of the present-day United States and southern Canada

Dakota a Native American group from the northern area of the present-day United States

Ojibwa a Native American group from the northern area of the present-day United States and southern Canada

Settlers people who move into a new country or area



Think About It

- Most people or their relatives came to the United States from another country. Ask a relative or neighbor about the country or countries where they or their relatives were born. What language did they speak? How did they learn English?
- Think of a word you use often. What does that word mean? If you can, have an adult help you look up the word in a dictionary and find out something about the word's history.
- Make up a new name for an object in your classroom or at home. Teach the new word to a classmate and tell the person what the name means and how you invented it.



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